Tools of the trade

To efficiently telecommute, you'll need the following tools.

Internet access: Most teleworkers have access to the Internet at home so that they can connect to their corporate network. As a home user, you can choose from four Internet access options:

Dial-up access: This may be the best option if you are on a tight budget. Dial-up access uses a modem and a telephone line to connect to the Internet. The drawbacks of using this option are that data is typically transmitted at a slow rate and it blocks the telephone line

Cable Internet: Cable Internet uses your local cable TV line to receive broadband Internet content. This data rate far exceeds that of modems and is about the same as DSL. Your local TV cable company is typically the cable Internet service provider

DSL: DSL stands for digital subscriber line. It uses ordinary telephone lines and a special modem to provide an Internet connection that can transmit high-bandwidth information to a user's computer. A DSL line can carry both data and voice signals. The data part of the line is a dedicated connection to the Internet and does not interfere with use of the telephone. DSL is high speed and is always connected to the Internet.

Satellite Internet: If cable or DSL aren't available in your area, or if the slow dial-up access speeds are not acceptable, consider using satellite Internet. It's available to you if you live in the Northern Hemisphere and have an unobstructed view of the southern sky. The service is expensive and the data rate is not as fast as a direct line, but it is a good connectivity alternative if you live in an isolated location.

Computer: Of course, you'll need a computer! You can use a desktop computer or a mobile PC. If you can take your mobile PC home from the office, you won't have to install the same programs on your desktop computer. If you do need to use a desktop computer to connect to your organization's network remotely, you may need to install additional software to meet your company's connectivity and security requirements.

Dedicated space with some privacy: I've heard more than one frustrated telecommuter state that they have a hard time focusing when they work at home. When I ask where their desktop computer or mobile PC is located, they usually say it's on the dining room table. By setting up your workspace in a busy location, you almost guarantee distractions. Instead, set up a safe, healthy, and efficient workspace with easy access to your computer, a phone, reference materials, and supplies.

Communication tools: When telecommuting, make sure that your colleagues, customers, and manager can communicate with you at all times. Whether you're in the office or working remotely, make it easy for people to contact you. Here are some suggestions:

- Share your phone number with people you work with regularly and leave your contact information with your manager and one or two additional contacts (such as your administrative assistant or receptionist). Also, consider using call forwarding to your home or cell phone so that you receive incoming calls wherever you're working

- Consider using instant messaging (IM). Similar to a chat room, IM is a fast means of communicating with one or more people in real time over the Internet. IM also gives you a way to show and update your communication status throughout the day. For example, when you need a couple of hours of undisturbed concentration, set your status as "Busy" and let everyone know that you'll be slower than usual to reply to e-mail messages and phone calls